

Calaveras group offers blueprint for partnership

Written by [Michael Kay, The Union Democrat](#) April 02, 2010

If a new regional effort to foster partnerships between loggers, lawyers and environmental activists in the Sierra Nevada succeeds, it might be all thanks to Calaveras County.

California's newest state agency, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, is pushing a "Sustainable Sierra Nevada Initiative" that would encourage the diverse and often-at-odds forces of the region to focus on commonalities, not differences.

It is a strategy taken, admittedly, straight from the playbook of a partnership born in northern Calaveras County about a year ago: The Calaveras-Amador Consensus Group.

"Hat's off to Calaveras County," said Kim Carr, Mount Whitney area manager for the conservancy. That really is serving for a model for us in this initiative," The bi-county group got started with a series of conversations, says Warren Alford, a program coordinator with the environmental group Sierra Forest Legacy who was involved with the group from early on. The spur was the plans for a biomass facility in Ione at a former ignite-burning power plant. Some in the group — many of whom were involved in the Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions project — were concerned about how the plant would impact the area. "There was a recognition by some folks that there needed to be some forest strategies worked out, regardless of who owns it," Alford said.

Over the coming weeks, an unlikely band of interested parties, including many former allies, would meet again and again to do something they were relatively unfamiliar with: discuss where they agreed, rather than where they disagreed. For instance, both can agree on the need for thinning, as an overgrown forest is at danger for catastrophic forest fires, which destroys both potential logging product and natural habitat. The driving force in both getting the process started and seeing it through was Supervisor Steve Wilensky, according to Alford and Carr.

Armed with a "unique ability to talk to folks from all kinds of different perspectives," said Alford, Wilensky time and again came back to one question: "Is it working for you?" And bit by bit, everyone found more they could agree on. The group did have some experiences further afield to draw on.

In Arizona, a similarly diverse partnership has worked together to get additional forest thinning work in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests through the usual gauntlet to approval. It's been a breeze. "No appeals, no lawsuits, none of the things that are always being raised as 'See, we can't get anything done because environmental groups don't want anything to get done,' " have come up, Alford said.

The success was an inspiration for the local group. "If it can happen there, we can do it here," he said.

And now that they have gotten started, Sierra Nevada Conservancy wants to get the rest of the region on board.

Among those who see promise in the plan are Tuolumne County Supervisor Paolo Maffei, who took Wilensky's place last month as the representative for Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa and Tuolumne counties on the conservancy's board of directors.

"We don't have to convert everything into a kind of people versus critters demagoguery," Maffei said.